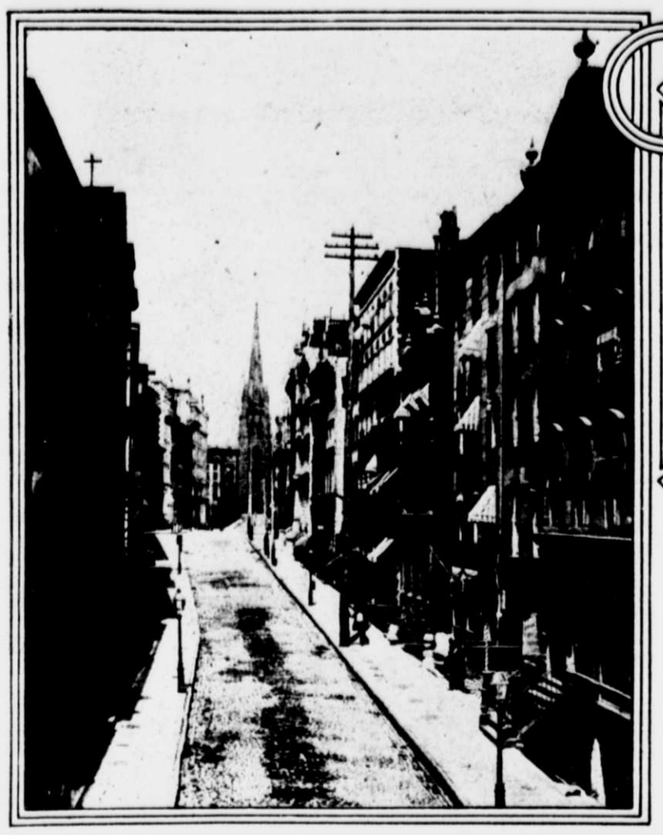
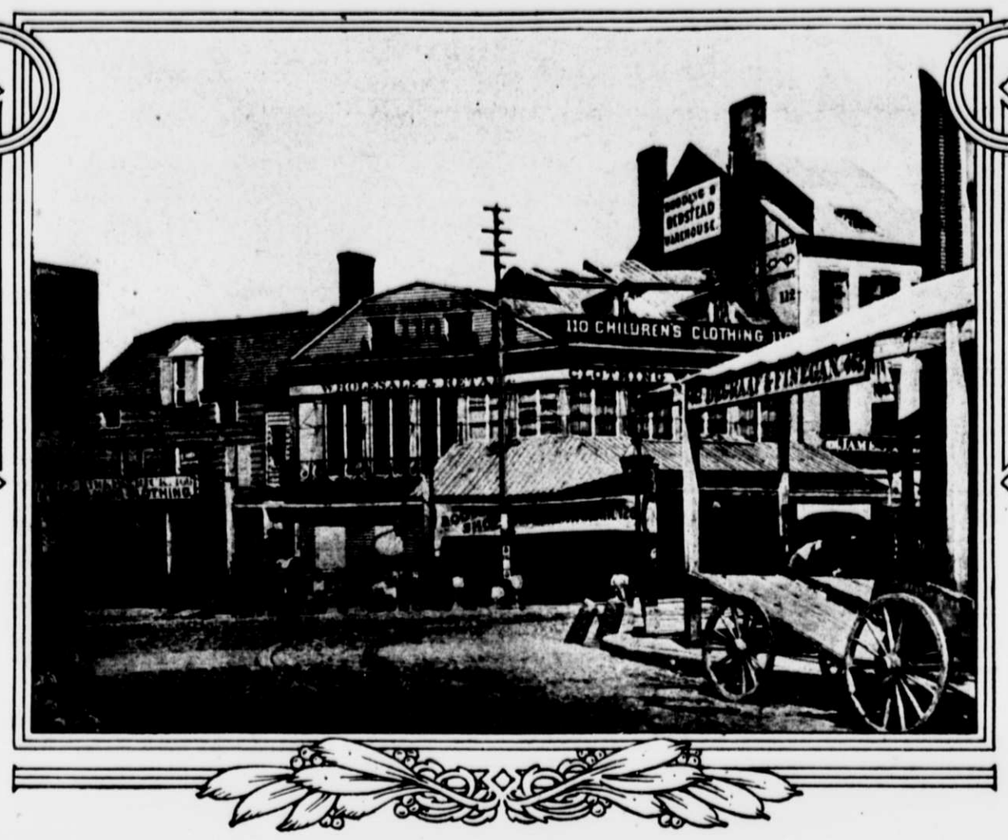
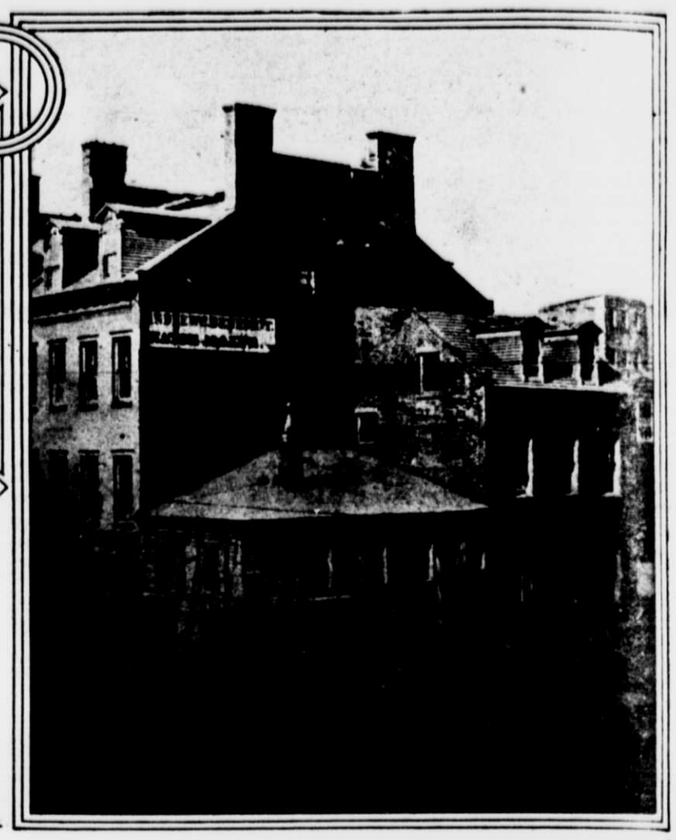
FEW LANDMARKS OF EARLY CITY IN NEW NEW YORK



How Wall street looked in 1881.



Pearl and Chatham streets (Park Row) in 1861.



Bayard street and the Bowery, 1859.

Hardly a Trace Remains of Visible Evidence That Civilized White Men Were Established Here More Than Three Centuries Ago

ONE who looks in New York city for tangible or visible evidence of the fact that it has been a civilized community for three centuries will have much looking to do. There is no lack of written records proving beyond a peradventure that it was already an established settlement of white men before the seventeenth century began, but of the work of their hands, outside of these writings, hardly a trace remains.

The very face of nature on the island, one end of which was then the site of the settlement, has been so changed by successive generations that it is no longer possible even to trace the original outline of that island, excepting on half forgotten maps. And as for the buildings which sheltered the first settlers, the fortifications they erected for protection against hostile Indians, their places of worship and public assemblage, the original improvements they planned and executed to facilitate the operations of that commerce on which the city has been supported until it has grown to be one of the very first among the capitals of the world, one and all have disappeared as completely as if they had never been.

New York is always new. The vital principle of growth, which, in the human frame eliminates every particle of its constituent matter, replacing the outworn with the new, so that an entirely different body comes into being every few years, retaining the individuality of the old, but composed of different material, manifests itself in precisely an analogous fashion in the corporation, once so puny and new among the giants of the earth.

The effort to give permanence to the architectural features of the city is one which has always inspired the builders, yet absolutely nothing remains of their earliest work, and practically all that was accomplished in the first two hundred years of their great activity has been removed to make room for newer structures that are fondly believed to be more permanent.

Less than forty years ago the Masonic fraternity founded, erected, dedicated and then occupied a Masonic temple, which was then expected to serve as a meeting place for its members for generations, if not for centuries, to come. It was well designed and executed as at once a home and a monument, secure against change.

Masons from all over the United States and from abroad gathered to participate in the imposing ceremonies of dedication, which continued for a week. Much was said and written of the satisfaction of the mystic order in having realized the hope of establishing a temple that should endure indefinitely.

Yet scarcely thirty years had passed when the Masonic Temple disappeared. Already it is almost forgotten that the site now occupied by a huge store was so little time ago the supposed abiding place of Masonry. Striking as this instance is, it is only one of thousands that might be cited to show the rapidity and completeness with which New York renews itself, so that antiquities have no place within its borders. Only here and there may something be found by the diligent seeker which serves as a visible reminder of bygone days.

Among these few remaining relics possibly the most interesting to the true antiquarian are the written records. From the beginning there has been a history of the city, presumably accurate in the earlier days, though lacking in many details that would be interesting, and abounding in details not always accurately told during later periods. Such as it is, there is history a-plenty, and the earlier chapters of it remain, so that with a single interval only there is an unbroken record of the official doings of the local government, and this record is itself, so far as the first part of it is concerned, the greatest antiquity now in the possession of the city.

For this first portion of the official history of New York still remains in its original manuscript form, securely locked up in the City Hall, jealously guarded by the clerk of the Board of Aldermen, in whose custody it is. Its only value, aside from its being authentic proof of early civilization, is that of a curiosity, for it is the merest skeleton of a history, consisting of a dry recital of official doings from 1653 to 1674 A. D., during which period New York was a Dutch settlement. Moreover, it is written in Dutch.

Practically forgotten as it is and trivial as the subject matter of it now appears, this mass of Dutch manuscript is probably the only piece of man's handiwork which remains unaltered in the whole city from the time it was done, 250 years ago.

These early Dutch records were reproduced in the Fernow translation in 1897 by the city and are open to the inspection of the public in the New York City Library, a place itself almost forgotten and now removed from the City Hall to a corner in the new Municipal Building. There are also to be found the official records of the British local government from 1674 to 1776 and of the doings of the city from 1784 to the present day. What records there were during the period of the Revolutionary war were lost or destroyed at that time.

Aside from this solitary relic of human effort in the seventeenth century nothing remains except the general layout of the city, which has itself been altered and enlarged, but which is still practically the same in the older portions.

It would seem to be easy to locate the oldest building now standing in the city, and doubtless this could be done by means of a tremendously laborious search of the records, but even that is doubtful, since all of the very oldest have disappeared and the age of some of the later ones is in dispute. There are some to be found, however, that date back to the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Even the graves of the earliest settlers can no longer be located, so that the slight links of connection with the past that are formed by tombstone inscriptions have been broken, but there are some that carry back to early times.

Perhaps the one which carries the mind furthest into early history is that on the door of the vault in which lies all that remains of Petrus Stuyvesant, underneath the church of St. Mark, on Second avenue. This church itself is reckoned an antiquity, having been built in 1799, but is as it stands to-day only the replacement of the original St. Mark's Chapel, which was erected by Petrus Stuyvesant himself while he was still living in the neighborhood in the middle of the seventeenth century.

The original edifice was already crumbling with age when the present one was put in its place, and though the whole neighborhood is still associated with the name of the great Dutch Governor, all that actually remains of what once gave it the name is the corpse that still looked lifelike when it was last looked upon in 1799.

The inscription on the door of the vault reads: "In this vault lies buried Petrus Stuyvesant, late Captain-General and Governor in Chief of Amsterdam in New Netherlands, now called New York, and the Dutch West Indies. Died in A. D. 1671-2. Age 80 years."

So that this tomb is an actual link connecting the twentieth with the sixteenth century, perhaps the only one that remains.

There are others, however, of more than respectable age. In the southern part of Trinity churchyard, in lower Broadway, is a stone on which is inscribed:

"Here lies the body of William Bradford, Printer, who departed this life May 23, 1752. Age, 92 years. He was born in Leicester, old England, in 1660, and came over to America before the city of Philadelphia was laid out. He was Printer to this Government for upwards of fifty years, and being quite worn out with old age and labors, he left this mortal state in the lively hopes of a blessed immortality.

"Reader, reflect how soon you'll quit this stage.
You'll find but few attain to such an age.
Life's full of pain: Lo here's a place of rest,
Prepare to meet your GOD: Then you are blest."

These two are by no means all that remain in the many burying grounds that are still to be found on Manhattan Island which serve as reminders of olden days, but they are perhaps the most notable. Some may be older than the original one that marked the grave of Petrus Stuyvesant, though this is doubtful, but for the most part they are so nearly obliterated by time as to be illegible, and the stories they might recall are forgotten.

One such that tells no story now remembered, but which is almost as old as Governor Stuyvesant's, is that which stands on the grave of a child in Trinity churchyard. It is the oldest one known in that burial ground and possibly the oldest original record of the kind on the island.

It reads:

W. C.
HEAR LYES THE BODY
OF RICHARD CHURCH
ER SON OF WILLIA
M CHURCHE WHO
DIED THE 5 OF APRIL
1681 OF AGE 5 YEARS
AND 5 MONTHS

Still another in the same yard is worthy of being quoted, though not so old, it having been put there so late as 1767. The stone marks the resting place of Sydney Breese, a New York merchant who was in early life a British army officer. The epitaph is said to have been written by himself and placed on the stone at his particular request. It reads:

Ha, Sydney, Sydney,
Lyest thou here?
I here lye
Til Time is Flown
To its Extremity.

But St. Mark's, St. Paul's and even Trinity are not the only burial grounds of great age remaining in the city despite the modern laws that forbid interments of the dead on Manhattan Island. In the New Bowery, near Oliver street, a portion of the old Jewish cemetery that dates back to Stuyvesant's time may still be found, though it was practically abandoned long ago, when its name was transferred to the newer location in Twenty-first street west of Sixth avenue, and the Hebrews began burying their dead in a more fashionable neighborhood, in a cemetery that is itself now almost forgotten. All that remains of that is now shut in so that it is invisible from the street, and it is rarely opened even to the visitor who seeks to see it for himself.

And there are others. One tiny patch is walled in next to the sidewalk on West Eleventh street, a short distance eastward from Sixth avenue, which is said to be all that is left of what was once another Jewish cemetery, but even those who live alongside of it know no more than that about it, and those who have tried to read the inscriptions on the crumbling stones have been unable to decipher them. Hardly any mention of the place can be found in the chronicles that have been consulted.

Trinity has two cemeteries which the great corporation of the church has kept in the best condition possible and which will remain undisturbed for a long time to come, and those of St. Paul's Chapel, on Broadway, and of St. Mark's are also jealously guarded against all changes but those of time itself, but excepting for these there are no others on the island which have not been encroached upon at the demand of those who coveted the space for the purpose of building upon it.

No longer ago than 1893 it was noted in "King's Handbook of New York City" that there were nearly fifty of these God's acres still to be found within the older limits of the city. To-day the most diligent search will fail in locating even the sites of many of these.

Concerning the buildings still standing which may fairly be called antiquities, the story is considerably different, though it serves as a somewhat startling reminder of the rapidity of the changes time brings about.

Of the untold number of houses that were builded within what are now the city limits more than two hundred years ago there are hardly more than half a hundred still standing. Of those on Manhattan Island there are probably not more than a dozen. It was indeed claimed not long ago for a small group of wooden houses on West street, between Christopher and West Tenth streets, that they were the oldest buildings then standing in Manhattan.

According to tradition, they were standing prior to 1767, which would give them a history of a century and a half. That, for New York, is respectable antiquity, even though the claim referred to can hardly be justified, since at least three edifices far better known than they were erected some years before that.

But even of this small group of houses only a portion of one of them is now to be found, and the presence of even that would never be suspected by a passenger on West street, for the portion of it which fronts there has been torn away to give place to the facade of an ordinary West street saloon.

The rear portion of it, however, is still to be seen on Weehawken street displaying no evidence of change excepting a huge sign which has been painted on the original boards and which tells the modern name of the saloon inside, and excepting also a modern door which has been built in as a rear entrance to the saloon. It is now known as the Clam Broth House, and the free lunch in the saloon consists mainly of clams. Concerning its early history not even the present owner of the property knows anything. He is an elderly man and he says he never even saw the place till his father, the previous owner, died.

The history of the two houses at 41 and 43 Cherry street, almost under the Brooklyn Bridge, is somewhat better known, though only meagre details are to be learned concerning them. They were built, the record says, in 1785 or 1786 by Joseph Latham, a man of considerable substance and excellent standing, who ocupied one of them as his own residence in what was then one of the fashionable neighborhoods of the city.

It is hard to realize when looking at them to-day that any portion of the story is true, for no trace of fashion can be discerned in them any more than it can in the neighborhood. They were excellently well built, however, in the first place, as they must needs have been to remain so long, and they have been kept in repair better than most of the other houses on the same block, so that excepting for the old fashioned doors and doorways they might be supposed to be the most modern of any there. The doors are, however, unmistakably antique, and being well preserved as they are they give an air of elegance to what seem otherwise to be quite ordinary edifices.

Both houses teem with foreign looking men day and night, and a foreign agency of some sort evidently carries on a prosperous business inside. It seems likely that while the Clam Broth House may very probably disappear in the near future these two will stand substantially unchanged for generations to come. The bricks of which their walls are constructed look as substantial and strong as if they had been laid this year.

One other building should properly be classed with these, standing as it does in a crowded street, practically unchanged architecturally since the time it was erected. It is the one at 7 State street, originally a private mansion and now the home of a Roman Catholic sisterhood, but its history has been told and retold so often that a repetition here would serve no purpose.

Outside of these there are only a very few buildings in the city originally designed for private occupancy that even rank in age with the comparatively modern Fraunces's Tavern, which has a record of less than two hundred years. These few, however, are notable and the most of them are well known.

The original Schermerhorn farmhouse, though it is not so old even as Fraunces's Tavern, deserves special mention, as it was one of the important buildings of its day and was the early home of the now famous Schermerhorn family. It was erected in 1747 near the foot of East Sixty-fourth street and still stands practically unchanged inside the grounds of the Rockefeller Institute. It is linked with the familiar history of the Schermerhorns and is not likely to disappear for many years to come.

Another farmhouse of bygone times is the one at 204th street and Broadway, known as the Dyckman house. Its history is also well known and it still remains in the possession of the descendants of the original Dyckman. It has belonged to the family since 1783, when it was built.

Still another and a much older one that is equally well known to historians is the Macomb mansion, which has stood on 230th street west of Broadway since 1693. It was a veritable country mansion long before the most sanguine futurist supposed it would become a piece of city property.

Another house, still standing though in lamentable disrepair, is perhaps two years younger than the Macomb mansion. This was built in 1695, though some say it was in 1668 and others 1689, and ambitiously called a castle by the bold navigator who sailed around Staten Island and was rewarded for his exploration with a liberal grant of land on the lower end of what is now the Borough of Richmond.

It has little of the look of a castle, but those who have explored it say that there are dungeons in the basement. The history of the house, and of the navigator alike, appear to be largely legendary, but the house itself is incontestable proof that there is at least a foundation of fact in the disconnected stories that are told of the founder of a family that long ago disappeared, though it has been said that some of their ghosts still linger in their old home. The Billop castle in Tottenville is the only one of the very old houses in New York that still enjoys the reputation of being haunted.

Two others, not so old as these, but classed as antique, are nearer the centre of the city, and of these the history is familiar and well authenticated. They are the Jumel Mansion, at 160th street and Edgecombe avenue, and the Van Cortlandt Mansion in Van Cortlandt Park.

Somebody said long ago that Gen. Washington must have spent the most of his life moving from one house to another, since there was hardly an edifice now standing in this part of the country that was habitable when he was alive for which the claim was not made that he had used it for his headquarters. Whatever foundation of truth there may or may not be, however, for any of the other stories there is no possible doubt that he so used the Jumel Mansion at one time.

Nor is there any question that it was at another time the home of Aaron Burr. It is, however, no part of the purpose of the present writing to rehash stories that are entirely familiar to all readers. Rather it is sought to recall facts that are not so generally known. The Jumel and the Van Cortlandt mansions, therefore, the latter of which is now the museum in Van Cortlandt Park, need be only mentioned in passing.

Less familiar to the general reader is the story of the house that stands by the edge of the woods near the end of Seventy-second street in Bergen Beach, but it too is interesting.

This house, now owned by the Bergen Beach Improvement Company, is known, and has been known for 200 years, as the Bergen homestead, but it was not that originally. It was erected in 1656 by Thomas Spicer, who purchased title to the land from Capt. John Underhill, a famous Indian fighter who was employed by Gov. Kieft in the days of Dutch supremacy to fight the Pequots. The land grant was a portion of his pay from the Government and he sold to Spicer.

Spicer, however, appears to have been a conscientious person, or possibly apprehensive of trouble, for before building the house in question he bought the land over again from the Indians, which action may account for the fact that the house still stands. Spicer built it for a home for himself and occupied it until he sold it to Bergen.

Spicer was a member of the Society of Friends, which was held in great disesteem by the Dutch Government, but he seems to have escaped the troubles that overtook another Quaker, named John Bowne, who built a year before he did a house that still stands at Bowne avenue and Washington street, in Flushing, and still retains the same appearance it had when it was first built. Two other houses that he built about the same time in the neighborhood are still there, but they were remodelled later.

Bowne allowed his home to be used as a meeting place for his fellow Quakers in Flushing, and thereby incurred the displeasure of the authorities, becoming a somewhat famous victim of the persecution the Quakers suffered at that period. He was arrested and brought into what was then the city, where he was for a time kept in a dungeon, so the story goes, and fed on bread and water only. Then he was sent to Amsterdam for a consideration of his case by higher authorities.

To this circumstance was due what is said to have been the first declaration of religious freedom coming from official sources on the other side to America, with the sole exception of a similar grant that was made in favor of Maryland. For the West India Company wrote to Gov. Petrus Stuyvesant that John Bowne was not to be molested so long as he did not disturb the peace of the community or oppose the Government.

In addition to the houses already mentioned there are undoubtedly a few others that antedate 1700 A. D. There is what is one of the very oldest that is known as the Moore house in Newtown, at Broadway and the Boulevard road. That is said to have been standing since 1661, but comparatively little of interest outside of its age is known about it. The brief list of antiquities, however, would be incomplete if it were not included.

The house of Jan Ditmar in Kouwenhoven place, Flatlands, is not so old, but it serves as a memorial to its owner who had an adventurous career in the war of the Revolution. Memorials of Revolutionary days, however, are not numerous, though by no means powerful, in the shape of buildings.

Of those more than 100 years old there are a good many standing, though even these are rapidly disappearing as the city renews itself. No reader of THE SUN needs to be told that its present home was built in 1811 and was the first permanent abiding place of the Tammany Society.

There are some buildings that will undoubtedly endure for a long time yet to come. The City Hall is a year older than the Sun building, but any proposal to remove what is recognized as one of the chief ornaments of the city would be likely to raise a riot.

The present Trinity Church is often spoken of as an ancient landmark, but it is really a modern building, having been erected in 1839, though the history of the church goes back to 1696. Two preceding edifices on the same site were destroyed by fire.

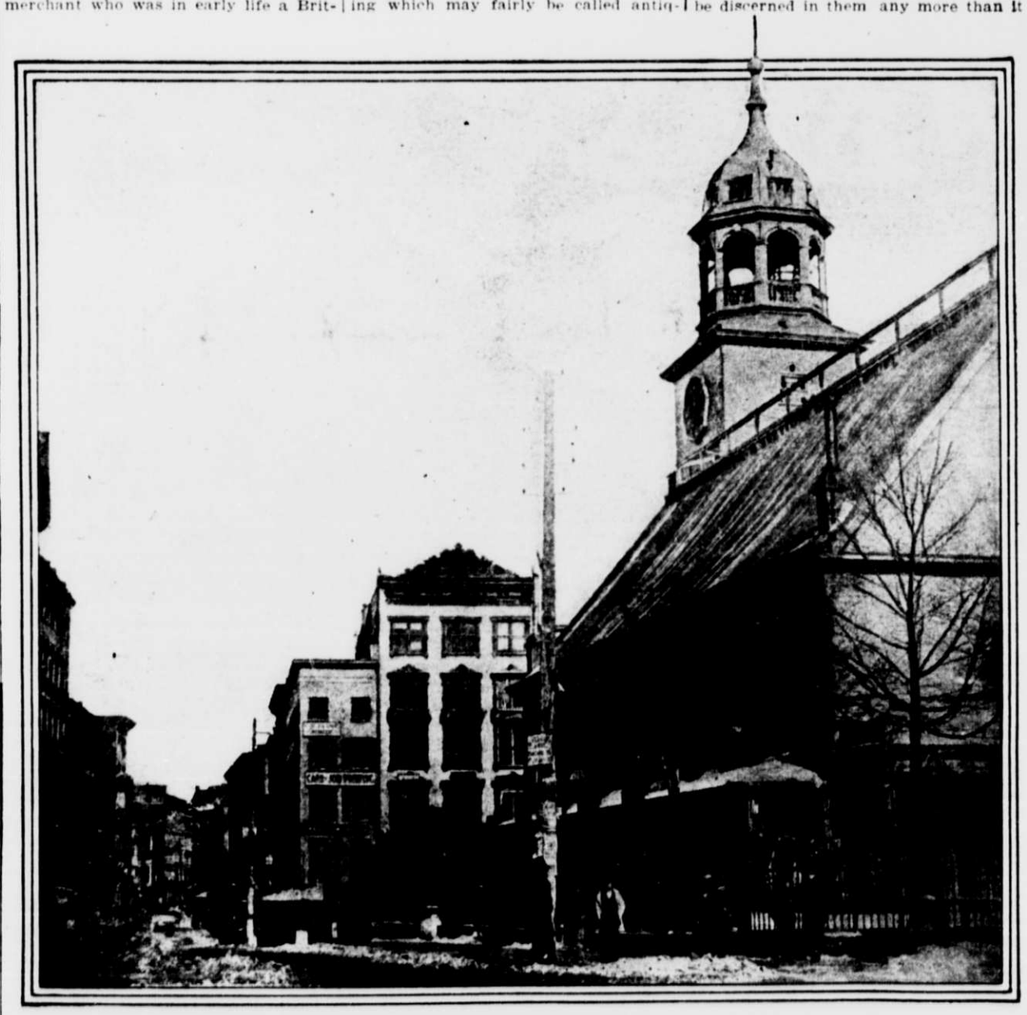
Of church edifices now standing St. Paul's Chapel at Broadway and Vesey street is the oldest, it having been built in 1764-66, while St. Mark's, as was said, dates only from 1799.

The summing up seems to be that there is scant room in the metropolis of the New World for anything that savors of antiquity. It is true that there is one relic of almost fabulous age carefully preserved in the shape of Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park, but it was imported at great expense of skill and money, as if to show that there is at least a sentiment of veneration in the community, even if the relic is entirely foreign to local history.

New York city seems determined in all ways to justify the first part of its name and to keep itself forever new in all its parts. The old is ruthlessly destroyed to make room for the new. Even the old names have many times been forgotten, and the late Mr. Conroy undoubtedly expressed a popular idea when an antiquarian protested to him against the proposed change in the name of Tubby Hook lane. It had historical associations, he said.

"Tubby Hook lane!" exclaimed the Mayor disdainfully, "who ever heard of an ugly old name like that in New York city?"

To-day he might ask, "Who were the members where Tubby Hook lane was?"



The Post Office, Nassau and Liberty streets, in 1855.